

Siljeholm, Olof (2009). *Die Funktion der Bibel in Brechts Parabelstück Der gute Mensch von Sezuan und in zwei seiner Vorlagen*. Tönning: Der Andere Verlag

SUMMARY

The Bible has had considerable impact on Brecht's literary production, which has already been verified by scholars such as Reinhold Grimm and G. Ronald Murphy. However little attention has been paid to the influence of the Bible on his parable play "The Good Person of Szechwan" (1938-1941) or on his earlier two texts "Arrival of the Gods" (n.d.) and "Matinee in Dresden" (1926). Nor have the alienation effects (Verfremdungseffekte) been scrutinized with regard to the Bible. Because of these facts my dissertation closely examines connections between Brecht's texts and the Bible. The results provide the basis for the investigation of the alienation effects.

In the prose fable "Arrival of the Gods" three of the most important gods arrive in Szechwan to look for pious people who are prepared to endure their harsh conditions and recognize them as gods. They ask the god-fearing water-seller to find lodgings for them. In the Bible Abraham receives the three visitors (the Almighty) with reverence and hospitality. The water-seller, however, encounters severe difficulties among his fellow citizens, who refuse to give the gods a dwelling place for the night. Here there are many allusions to the Bible. The style is solemn and shows strong affinities with the language of Martin Luther. Brecht's use of the coordinating conjunction *and* is a characteristic feature, which is also frequently used in the Bible.

In the early text "Matinee in Dresden" we meet three "gods" (Brecht, Bronnen, Döblin), who are invited to Dresden as lecturers.¹ They do not even get a crumb from the table, whereas the respected guest Alea (Werfel) is having a sumptuous meal. Obviously this situation refers to the biblical parable of Lazarus and the rich man.² The good person Sibillus fears that the gods can take revenge; the city can be flooded. This is the first reference to the devastating floods in the parable play.

¹ BBW 13:334-335.

² Luke 16:19-31. NRSV: 61.

In the prologue to “The Good Person of Szechwan” frustration is widely spread among the inhabitants because of the utter poverty in the province. The water-seller Wang announces that heavens will intervene and that their suffering may soon come to an end: “To my inexpressible joy a widely - travelled cattle-dealer has told me that some of the highest gods are already on their way, and that Szechwan may see them too.”³ Wang’s message evokes associations to the Prophet Isaiah: “A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”⁴

The gods meet the god-fearing water-seller Wang, who greets them with the reverent words “Yours to command, Illustrious Ones!”⁵ They ask Wang to find them shelter for the night. The hard-hearted and selfish people refuse to give the gods lodgings. Wang condemns his fellow citizens in the following reprehensive way: “You’ll all roast in brimstone for your lack of interest.”⁶ The Prophet Isaiah condemns Edom and its godless sinners: “And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into brimstone; her land shall become burning pitch.”⁷

In fact, the authenticity of the gods remains unquestioned in the religiously traditional world of Wang. In the first interlude the gods choose Wang as their counterpart. The dialogues between them, in five of the seven interludes, remind us of the dialogues between Abraham, Moses, Job and God in the Old Testament.

Wang’s first mission, to find shelter for the gods, nearly fails. Only the prostitute Shen Teh is prepared to receive them. She is god-fearing and wants to obey the statutes and laws of the Lord. The gods reward Shen Teh with a gift of money. This enables her to buy a small tobacco shop, and she hopes to be able to do a great deal of good. Shen Teh’s wish to show empathy makes her an easy victim to greedy neighbours. Finally the financial situation becomes desperate. Shen Teh proclaims as Shui Ta: “Good deeds are the road

³ Prologue:3.

⁴ Isaiah 40:3. NRSV:517.

⁵ Prologue:3-4.

⁶ Prologue:7.

⁷ Isaiah: 34,9. NRSV:513.

to ruin!”⁸ Wang replies wildly: “And evil deeds are the road to the good life, (...).”

The parable play can be compared to “The Book of Job,” where the suffering Job asks the following question: “Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?”⁹ The parable play, however, differs from the biblical text, because the Almighty finally restores the god-fearing, pious Job to his former glory.

Shen Teh is forced to disguise herself as her tough cousin Shui Ta, who lets harsh reality control her life. For him Mammon is more important than any biblical rules. Shen Teh’s double identity remains a secret until the end of the play. To survive, however, she needs Shui Ta, which the gods reluctantly have to accept. Finally, they disappear to their heavens on a cloud, leaving Shen Teh to herself.

The water-seller informs the three gods that Shen Teh has ruined her own life, because she obeyed the commandment to love her neighbours.¹⁰ Wang asks the Illustrious Ones to intervene and stand by her. The gods are, however, of the opinion that Shen Teh has got to help herself. “Suffering ennobles!”¹¹ This statement evokes connections with the following words by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”¹²

The gods unanimously proclaim their function as observers (*Betrachtende*) as follows: “We are but observers. We firmly believe that our good person will find her own feet on this sombre earth. Her powers will wax with her burden.”¹³

“The Book of Ecclesiastes” is a very important text in Brecht’s literary work. “The Song of the Smoke” describes how three generations lose their foothold in a world of exploitation. The refrain reads: “Like smoke twisting grey / Into

⁸ Scene 10:104

⁹ Job: 21,7. NRSV:365.

¹⁰ Interlude 5:70. Levitikus:19,18. NRSV:83.

¹¹ Interlude 5:70.

¹² Matthew 5:4. NRSV:3.

¹³ Interlude 5:71.

ever colder coldness you'll / Blow away."¹⁴ The emptiness of life refers to the pessimistic outlook in the Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."¹⁵

According to Brecht the proclamation of the futility of all endeavour in "The Ecclesiastes" is a devastating message to Mankind. In his opinion such a message is not to be tolerated. The awareness of having the capacity to change the world is of the utmost importance to reach the ultimate aim, to bring about security and human conditions in society. People are bound to take measures against injustice and follow their own guidelines.

The parable play exposes a critical approach to God and the gods in Brecht's texts. The Trinity can be looked upon as a poetic stand-in for God in the Bible. They represent the Church in other words an institution that serves the traditional cultural and political structure and with it the status quo. The gods cannot relate to the actual economic and moral situation in Szechwan.

One of Brecht's poetic methods in the parable play is his use of biblical allusions. They may consist of words or phrases from the Bible like the "crowing of the rooster"¹⁶ or situations like the mock wedding in Szechwan, which is related to "The Wedding at Cana" in the New Testament.¹⁷

My investigation comes to the conclusion that Brecht's style maintains a high degree of ambiguity with regard to intertextuality as well as alienation (*Verfremdung*). The marriage scene (*Die Hochzeitsszene*) contains several allusions to the Bible. Shen Teh tells the perplexed bridegroom Sun the following truth: "If you like me [Shen Teh], you can't like him [Shui Ta]." She also states the fact: "It is impossible for him [Shui Ta] to be where I [Shen Teh] am."¹⁸ These two sentences refer to the Gospel according to John, where Jesus tells the Pharisees "You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come."¹⁹ Brecht uses the Bible to confront us with a poetic middle world, in which biblical allusions are used to expose respect/disrespect for both believers and non-believers. He expresses his social

¹⁴ Scene 1:19-20.

¹⁵ Scene 1:19. Ecclesiastes:1,2. NRSV: 477. Ecclesiastes12,8. NRSV:482.

¹⁶ Mark:13,35. NRSV:39.

¹⁷ Scene 6. The Wedding at Cana. John 2:1-12. NRSV:71.

¹⁸ Scene. 6:65.

¹⁹ John: 7,34. NRSV:76.

message above all through the split nature of the protagonist Shen Teh/Shui Ta.

The parable play contains biblical and Marxian overtones. The author wants the audience to become socially active rather than socially contemplative. Familiar situations taken for granted must be shown in a light that exposes social injustice. Both insight and activity are needed to bring about changes. The way the author wishes to achieve this transition into a world, where human values are predominant, is through the frequent use of alienation (*Verfremdung*).

The proximity of God characterizes the whole parable play. Similarities and dissimilarities between Brecht's gods and God in the Bible give sharpness and intensity to the main issue: the impossibility of letting empathy and love control life.

Brecht creates a poetic "Zwischenraum" in order to expose a paradox: the current social conditions seem incompatible with the biblical command to be good. Kindness is shown to be ruinous to business success. The irony Brecht exposes about human society and business is that successful existence on God's earth is incompatible with the human goodness that God in heaven commands us to have. Brecht would like us to realize, like compassion and generosity, are dangerous in the world of Sezuan.